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HELPING TO CONTROL FLOODS AT THEIR SOURCE - IV

A radio discussion among F. A. Silcox, Chief of Forest Service, Dillion S. Myer, of the Soil Conservation Service, and Milton S. Eisenhower, Director of Information, broadcast Friday, March 5, 1937, in the Department of Agriculture period of the National Farm and Home Hour by 57 stations associated with the National Broadcasting Company.

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SALISBURY:

Today we bring you the fourth of a series of discussions on flood control -- on the job the Congress instructed the Department of Agriculture to do when it passed the Omnibus Flood Control Act. So we present Mr. Silcox, Chief of the Forest Service, Mr. Myer, of the Soil Conservation Service, and Mr. Eisenhower, Director of Information. All right, Milton.

EISENHOWER:

Thank you, Morse -- and hello everyone. Our discussion today is going to deal with details and procedure. But before we get into that I want to review very briefly the high spots of what has gone before.

In our first discussion, you'll recall, Mr. Silcox, Mr. Bennett, and I told you that proper land use and upstream engineering can make five important contributions to flood prevention. Next, we discussed the Omnibus Flood Control Act of 1936 and the work that Congress instructed the Department to get under way. Then, in our third discussion, we pointed out that the States, local agencies, and private individuals can take -- in fact, must take -- an active part in preventing floods at their source. And we explained some of the features of the Standard State Soil Conservation Districts Law which would enable farmers to cooperate in soil erosion control and flood control.

Now, today, we want to refer back to the discussion on the Flood Control Act and take up in greater detail some of the work the Department will carry on under the Act.

Just to refresh your memories, I'm going to ask Mr. Silcox to give us about 50 words on the Act itself.

SILCOX:

It can't be done in 50, Milton. The Act of 1936 is of profound historic significance and must be treated accordingly. The people of this country have recklessly and ruthlessly abused the land -- yes, destroyed it And now today we have dust storms and floods. The situation has been brought on by civilization and now it's up to civilization to correct its past mistakes. We can't do it piecemeal. We've got to tackle the job on the land, in the small streams, and in the large ones. That's what the 1936 Act recognized and that's why I say the Act is profoundly important.

Well, here's the way I'd summarize it - - - The Flood Control Act says to the War Department: "You are responsible for examinations and surveys and for flood control work on the trunk rivers and waterways." To the Department of Agriculture it says: "You are responsible for the examinations and surveys for flood control on the watersheds." And while this isn't in the Act, you can read it between the lines. It says: "We've tarried long enough. Get busy."

MYER:

A good summary, Sil. . and not too long at that. You said the Department of Agriculture is responsible for examinations and surveys. Perhaps we'd better explain the difference between the two.

SILCOX:

A good idea, Dillon. . . Go ahead.

MYER:

Suppose I start this way: The Act says that the Department of Agriculture may help in flood control work on a watershed only under one condition. That condition is that the benefits from such work must be greater than the estimated costs and the lives and security of people must be safeguarded.

So our first job is to determine whether or not work on a watershed would meet these conditions.

EISENHOWER:

That's what the preliminary examinations are all about.

MYER:

Right . . . We have to make a general study of the watersheds to find out whether work of this type would be justified under terms of the Flood Control Act. If the answer is "Yes" we will follow it up with a detailed survey that goes into every aspect of the problem.

EISENHOWER:

So there we have the difference between an examination and survey. But now . . . If the examination shows that work on a certain watershed is not justified, we will simply prepare a report to Congress with that recommendation, and no detailed survey will be made. On the other hand, if the examination indicates that work would be justified, we'll proceed with a detailed survey that will serve as a guide to Congress in authorizing actual control work.

MYER:

That's the situation in a nutshell.

EISENHOWER:

Well, let's see just what these preliminary examinations cover. They involve, of course, a study of past and present conditions, as well as expectations for the future. What's the first step, Sil?

SILCOX:

When Department workers go into a watershed to make the preliminary study, they will first obtain a general description of the area. Then they will study the history of the area -- find out what the original conditions were, and what the consequences were of the changes that man has made in the use of the land. They'll also have to look into the records on rainfall and snowfall in the watershed.

MYER:

Next . . . the Department's specialists will study the distribution of population, to find out how many people live in sections of the watershed directly affected by floods.

EISENHOWER:

What about the damage that floods and high water do to property?

MYER:

Yes . . . We'll have to know about the damage that floods have done to crops, farm lands, pastures, and farm buildings - - and also to city property, railroad lines, and so on.

SILCOX:

That's right, Dillon, and on top of all these things, we must take into account the loss of life and the human suffering caused by floods.

EISENHOWER:

Yes . . . And the examinations will consider the effect of erosion and water run-off on water supplies. If losses continue in some watersheds, it may mean that families will be faced with a serious water shortage in a very few years. Crops would suffer too, of course.

SILCOX:

How the land is used will have a lot to do with that, Milton. We will have to see what percentage of a watershed is in soil-protecting crops, and what percentage is in crops that do not help prevent soil and water losses. In fact, we will have to consider the whole economy of a watershed -- particularly the farm economy. We need to know whether most of the land is owned by individuals or by the Federal or State governments, whether there is a high percentage of tenancy, whether there is much tax delinquency, whether the average farm is large or small, - and we'll also need to know the predominant type of farming - whether it is dairying, corn, wheat, cotton, or some other type.

The same inventory will lead us to a study of the damage done by the silting of stream channels, reservoirs, harbors, and irrigation ditches.

EISENHOWER:

Well, now - we've spent some time talking about damages. What about benefits to be derived from a watershed program? Will the preliminary examinations go into that?

MYER:

Oh, yes - - We will estimate the possible benefits in terms of saving the soil and water for agriculture and forestry, in terms of social and economic improvements, protection of rivers and reservoirs from silting, and so on.

EISENHOWER:

You know, I'm certain anyone listening to us today must feel that there is some contradiction here.

MYER:

How's that, Milton?

EISENHOWER:

Well, Sil started off by saying that we want action . . . that we've shilly-shallied long enough. Yet anyone hearing us must feel that these surveys we've been talking about will take so long there won't be much left to save.

SILCOX:

I'm glad you brought that up, Milton. We should make it clear that these examinations will not take long. It may be a pious hope, but at least we do hope that the preliminary examinations of all 222 watersheds named in the Act can be completed within one year after funds become available - and that should be fairly soon now.

But I see that our time is just about gone. Before we stop, shouldn't we summarize briefly what we've discussed today? How about it, Milton?

EISENHOWER:

All right. But I'll make it brief. The Department of Agriculture will soon begin making the preliminary examinations of 222 watersheds as directed by the Flood Control Act. These will consider generally, all the physical, social, and economic factors that have influenced the erosion and flood problems. If, in the light of all these factors, the benefits from a watershed program appear to be greater than the costs,

a detailed survey will be made to form the basis of a control program. This program will be set forth in a report to Congress for its guidance in providing for control operations. But if the preliminary examination indicates greater costs than benefits from a program, there will be no detailed survey; a negative report on that watershed will be submitted to Congress.

SALISBURY:

Thanks to the three of you. What phase of the flood-control problem do you intend to take up next week, Milton?

EISENHOWER:

I'm not sure, Morse. We thought we would discuss either some of the economic implications of watershed protection, or what the control of water on the lands means to city people.

SALISBURY:

O.K. Either one. . . Farm and Home Hour listeners, you have heard another discussion on the watershed and upstream engineering phases of flood control by F. A. Silcox, Chief of the Forest Service; Dillon Myer, of the Soil Conservation Service; and M. S. Eisenhower, Director of Information. They'll report to you again next week.

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